

TITLE: *Mentoring Millennials*

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Abstract

A monumental changing of the guard is currently taking place in organizations due to demographic metabolism. One of the largest birth cohorts or generations in history (Baby Boomer) is beginning to retire, and a new age cohort (Millennial, a.k.a. Gen Y) greater in size than the Baby Boomer cohort is making a debut. Employees with 40 to 50 years of professional experience are trading their time cards for bingo cards.

At the turn of the century, Boston College's Social Welfare Research Institute released a report suggesting the greatest transfer of wealth in the history of the world would take place between the early 2000s and 2052. The study inspired me to think about something more valuable than monetary wealth—the transfer of knowledge between generations—specifically between the Baby Boomers and Millennials.

The largest monetary investment organizations make is not in technology, buildings or processes—it's in payroll. Organizations have purchased a treasure of knowledge that lies buried in the experience of their employees. Most of it is tacit knowledge, and tacit knowledge can only be transferred through relationship.

Coaching and mentoring skills have never been more important. Millennials are the first generation that has not needed an authority figure to access information, and therefore, they do not have a felt need to build a relationship with authority. The rules for engagement have changed, and it is imperative that coaches and mentors understand that. I will share specific areas in which Millennials need help and strategies for helping them.

Introduction

One of the more generally accepted critiques of the Millennial (1983-2001) age cohort is that they are not loyal to organizations—any organizations. Organizations have become adept at attracting and recruiting Millennials with their messaging but continue to find it difficult to keep them. Prior literature strongly supports that organizational socialization leads to organizational commitment (Lankau & Scandura, 2002). Payne and Huffman argue that organizational socialization can be achieved by promoting mentoring relationships (2005). While mentoring relationships serve as a path to organizational commitment, perhaps, more importantly, they are critical to the transfer of *tacit knowledge*—knowledge that is not written down and that has taken a lifetime to acquire but could easily be retired.

A study by the Social Welfare Institute of Boston College suggests we are in the midst of the largest transfer of wealth in the history of the world. We are also arguably on the cusp of experiencing the greatest opportunity for the transfer of tacit knowledge in the history of the world. The Baby Boomers (1946-1964) were the largest generation ever until the Millennials arrived. By 2015, over half of the workforce will be comprised of Millennials. It is what Norman Ryder refers to as demographic metabolism. "Society persists despite the mortality of its individual members, through processes of demographic metabolism and particularly the annual

infusion of birth cohorts. These may pose a threat to stability but they also provide the opportunity for societal transformation” (1965, p. 843).

Mentoring relationships can help to mitigate the threat of generational differences and create a place for a conversation *with* rather than *about* the other. The type of mentoring relationship primarily addressed in this paper is considered traditional. For the sake of clarity and context, Eby’s (2010, p. 505) definition of mentoring will be used, “Mentoring refers to a developmentally oriented interpersonal relationship that is typically between a more experienced individual (i.e., the mentor) and a less experienced individual (i.e., the protégé).”

It is important to note that my study was not about mentoring per se but may have produced insight for those who mentor. It is not the intent of this paper to compare or argue the merit and efficacy of mentoring conditions and curricula (formal, informal, career-development, or psychosocial mentoring), but rather to provide information to inspire and integrate into the reader’s own work.

This paper will contain insight from my previous research in hopes of informing best practices for mentoring Millennials: 1) Millennials may not present themselves as wanting or needing a mentor, 2) the difference between effective managers and challenged managers, 3) the competencies needed to mitigate tension between managers and Millennials, 4) challenges Millennials report to face when they enter the workforce, and 5) advantages Millennials perceive themselves to have in the workplace due to their youth.

Millennials may not present themselves as wanting or needing a mentor

Kram (1983) proposed that mentors gravitate to employees with potential for advancement, show an interest in learning, and are enjoyable to be with. Kram’s observation came 20 years before the first wave of Millennials started to enter the workforce. Millennials are the first generation that has not needed an authority figure to access information. They do not have a *felt need* to build a relationship with authority. In practice, authority figures are the last place that a Millennial will go to investigate something. Unfortunately, the behavior is off-putting to potential mentors and, worse, may even be perceived as arrogance. Many potential mentors are eager to be approached for their help but find the path to their offices unworn, their inboxes empty, and the phone silent. In short, we have a generation that does not know how to initiate a relationship with authority and a generation that does not think it is their responsibility to reach out first. Both groups are acting consistent with their own experience.

The differences between effective managers and challenged managers

In an effort to embrace Millennials, a key adaptation effective managers make is to suspend the bias of their own experience. Simply put, they do not use their own experience as a blueprint or starting point for everyone else. Rather, they initiate a relationship and do so by starting with the experience of their direct reports—no matter how limited.

The managers who were unable to suspend the bias of their own experience were less likely to self-reflect or adapt. The inability to suspend bias inhibits one from asking questions like, 1) Why does their behavior bother me? 2) Where might my thinking be wrong? and 3) What

adaptations do I need to make? Getting outside of the orbit of their own experience helped the effective managers adapt their perspective, management style, and approach to engaging Millennials. Espinoza, Ukleja, and Rusch (2010) identified key differences in perspective between people who effectively manage Millennials and people who struggle (see Table 1).

Table 1
The Effective Versus Challenged Perspectives

Perspective	The Effective Managers	The Challenged Managers
Adaptability	Talked about their own need to change in order to manage in “today’s world”	Talked about how others needed to change in order to make it in the “real world”
Self-efficacy	Believed there was something they could do about their situation	Believed that there was little they could do about their situation
Confidence	Allowed their subordinates to challenge them (ideas, processes, ways of doing things)	Sanctioned or punished their subordinates for challenging them
Power	Used the power of relationship versus the power of their position	Felt the only power they had was their positional authority
Energy	Working with Millennials made them feel younger	Working with Millennials made them feel older
Success	Saw themselves as key to the Millennials’ success	Saw the Millennials as an impediment to their own success

The Competencies Needed to Mitigate Tension Between Managers and Millennials

As you see below, Millennial intrinsic values are quite desirable. Unfortunately, the way the intrinsic values are perceived by managers creates tension between the two groups. The nine core competencies differentiated the effective managers from the challenged ones (Espinoza, et. al, 2010). While the two groups agreed about their perceptions of the Millennials, they differed greatly in how they responded to Millennials. The effective managers consistently demonstrated the managerial competencies (see Table 2).

Table 2
Perceived orientations, Millennial intrinsic values, and managerial competencies

Perceived Orientation of a Millennial	Millennial Intrinsic Value	Required Managerial Competency
Autonomous	Work-Life Blending	Flexing
Entitled	Reward	Incenting

Imaginative	Self-Expression	Cultivating
Self-Absorbed	Attention	Engaging
Defensive	Achievement	Disarming
Abrasive	Informality	Self-Differentiating
Myopic	Simplicity	Broadening
Unfocused	Multitasking	Directing
Indifferent	Meaning	Motivating

Challenges Millennials report to face when they enter the workforce

The managerial study was deductive in that a phenomenon was observed and a theory created. The study of Millennials was inductive in that it started with the theory that managerial perceptions could adversely impact Millennials in the workforce (see Table 3). Furthermore, if the challenges were identifiable, Millennials could benefit from understanding why the challenges exist and what to do about them. Table 4 represents the challenges Millennials face when entering the workforce and what they want in the workplace experience. Table 5 represents the challenges Millennials face and strategies for overcoming them.

Table 3

Comparison of Manager Perceptions of Millennials (Espinoza et al., 2010) and Challenges Millennials Face in the Workplace (Espinoza, 2012)

Manager Perceptions of Millennials	Challenges Millennials Face in the Workplace
Autonomous: Millennials express a desire to do what they want when they want, have the schedule they want, and not worry about someone micro-managing them. They don't feel they should have to conform to office processes as long as they complete their work.	Rigid processes
Entitled: The attitude expressed by Millennials that they deserve to be recognized and rewarded. They want to move up the ladder quickly but not always on managements' terms. They want a guarantee for their performance, not just the opportunity to perform.	Being perceived as "entitled"
Imaginative: Millennials are recognized for having a great "imagination" and can offer a fresh perspective and unique insight into a myriad of situations. Their imagination can distract them from participating in an ordered or mechanistic process.	Rigid processes and Proving my value
Self-Absorbed:	Not getting respect and Not being taken

Millennials are perceived to be primarily concerned with how they are treated rather than how they treat others. Tasks are seen as a means to their ends. Millennials are often preoccupied by their own personal need for trust, encouragement, and praise.	seriously
Defensive: Millennials often experience anger, guardedness, offense, resentment, and shift responsibility in response to critique and evaluation. They want to be told when they are doing well but not when they are doing poorly.	Getting helpful feedback
Abrasive: Perhaps due to technology, Millennial communication style can be experienced as curt. They are perceived to be inattentive to social courtesies like knowing when to say thank you and please. Whether intentional or not, their behavior is interpreted as disrespectful or usurping authority.	Miscommunication with older workers
Myopic: Millennials struggle with cause-and-effect relationships. The struggle is perceived as a narrow sightedness guided by internal interests without an understanding of how others and the organization are impacted.	A lack of experience
Unfocused: Millennials, as a cohort, are recognized for their intellectual ability but are often perceived to struggle with a lack of attention to detail. They have a hard time staying focused on tasks for which they have no interest.	Understanding expectations
Indifferent: Millennials are perceived as careless, apathetic, or lacking commitment.	A lack of patience

Table 4
Challenges Compared With What Millennials Want (Espinoza, 2012)

Challenges	What Millennials Want
A lack of experience	To have more opportunity
Not being taken seriously	To be listened to
Not getting respect	To be accepted

Being perceived as “entitled”	To be rewarded for work
A lack of patience	To be promoted faster
Getting helpful feedback	To know how they are doing
Understanding expectations	To know what is expected of them
Miscommunication with older workers	To have a good relationship with older workers
Rigid processes	To have a say in how they do their job
Proving my value	To be recognized

Table 5

Challenges Millennials Face and Strategies For Overcoming Challenges (Espinoza, 2012)

Challenges Millennials Face	Strategies for Overcoming Challenges
A lack of experience	Identify people with experience (mentors) and ask them a lot of questions
Not being taken seriously	Take responsibility for everything you control (communication, work, dress)
Not getting respect	Be respectful
Being perceived as “entitled”	Show gratitude and express appreciation
A lack of patience	Try to understand your manager’s perspective and keep being persistent in your effort
Getting helpful feedback	Ask specific questions about your performance
Understanding expectations	Ask what is expected, listen, and then tell them what you heard them say
Miscommunication with older workers	Build a relationship by taking an interest in them
Rigid processes	Do it their way effectively and then offer your ideas for improvement
Proving my value	Align your strengths with the organization’s needs

Advantages Millennials perceive themselves to have in the workplace due to their youth

Ironically, Millennials are very optimistic about their future even in the light of sky rocketing education debt, a poor job market, and having to move back in with mom and dad. They know they have time on their side. They know that Baby Boomers will eventually have to go. Table 6 lists the advantages they perceive to have as a generation over other generations at work.

Table 6

Perceived Advantages of Being a Younger Worker (Espinoza, 2012)

Advantages
Technologically savvy
Fresh education
Energy
Social networking ability
Flexibility
Global mindset
Creativity
Teachable
Tolerant
Goal oriented

Conclusion

Understanding Millennial intrinsic values can demystify behaviors or attitudes that may inhibit a mentor or manager from initiating a relationship with a Millennial. There is an effective mindset and set of competencies that are important when engaging Millennials. Understanding the challenges Millennials face as a result of how they are perceived in the workplace can shed light on how mentors and managers can best help them overcome barriers they will face at work.

Future Interest

I am intrigued by *relational mentoring theory*. Sushmita and Jomon (2013, p. 712) expound on Ragins' work, "Relational perspective extends our lens on mentoring from a one-sided, exchange based relationship focused on protégé career outcomes to a dyadic communal relationship with cognitive and affective processes that lead to mutual learning, growth, and development." I think Millennials would thrive in that form of mentoring. Relational mentoring would be worth experimenting with in both the workplace and the classroom. In the early 1990s Alison King (1993) warned that the 21st Century would necessitate a shift in pedagogy from *Sage On The Stage* to *Guide On The Side*. We could now moving to an era of *Learning With* (Espinoza, *Boundaries*, 2012).

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